

When it all happened my tale will not tell you, but I know it did long, long ago, for the sun never rose then nor gave of its warmth and light, a pall of darkness lay over all, and sorrow reigned on earth.

But the old people spoke of an even earlier time when night had been followed by day which brought with it blue skies and bright sunshine. They said that it was only later that the dragons had come and stolen the sun, hiding it none knew where.

Now, it was in the time of darkness that there lived on the edge of the forest a man and his wife. The man worked very, very hard, but the couple were very poor, and there were days when there was nothing to eat in the house, not even a crust of bread.

One day the man came home and said to his wife:

"The people of this land, those who are as poor as you and me, are going to try to find the sun and free it. I am joining them."

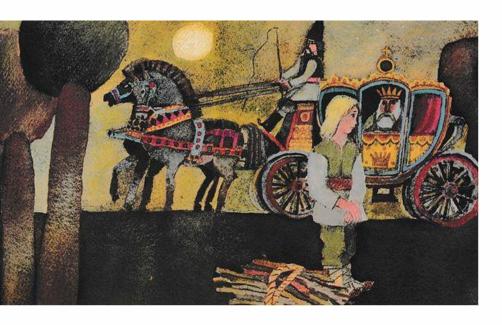
And though his wife wept and cried she could not stop him. He went away and never came back, and it was as if the earth had swallowed him.

The woman was left all alone, but soon a son was born to her, and she took joy in the sight of him and was happy.

The boy was given the name of Ion, but she always called him Ionike Fet-Frumos, Fet-Frumos being Moldavian for my lovely little son.

lonike was a boy like no other. He was not yet three when he began helping his mother with her chores in the house and in the fields. But though they both worked very hard they were as poor as ever.

One day Ionike asked his mother to tell him about his father.



"Maybe I can do what my father did and follow in his footsteps," said he.

The mother, who feared for her son, burst into tears, but Ionike kept asking about his father again and again, and there came a day when she could not keep the truth from him any longer.

Ionike was deeply moved by what his mother told him. Never again after that could he forget that there had once been a time when the sun gave the earth of its light and warmth. He would think of the sun as he worked, he would see it in his dreams, and he even made a song about it which he would sing wherever it was he went and whatever it was he was doing.

This was the song:

"It was the dragons that stole the bright sun

And carried it far away.

One who is brave, one who is strong

Will come and free it some day.

Then will the earth know gladness anew,

For sunshine will banish night;

Then will the fields be golden with wheat,

Pleasing the heart and sight.

When I grow up, when in wisdom I gain,

When myself to be strong I know,

A sword I will take and a cudgel as well

And in search of the bright sun go. "

One day Ionike was in the forest gathering brushwood and singing his song when the ruler of the realm who went by the name of the Black Tsar because he was blind happened to be driving by there in his coach.

"I have everything my heart desires, everything save the sun," said he to himself when he heard the song. "Now, if only I could get the sun for myself too, I would have the whole of the earth in my power."

He ordered his servants to stop the horses and to fetch the singer.

The servants seized Ionike Fet-Frumos and brought him to the tsar who asked him if it was he who had been singing about the sun.

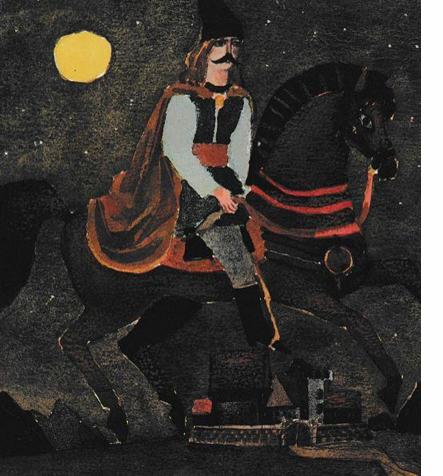
"Yes indeed," said lonike. "I made up the song myself. I sang about something I mean to do."

The tsar knew by Ionike's voice that he was very young.

"What is your name, lad?" he asked.

"Ionike. But they call me Ionike Fet-Frumos," Ionike told him.

"Listen to me, Ionike," the tsar said. "If you really want to free the sun, then I will be only too glad to help you. You will live with me in my palace where you will have all you need to make you very strong. And when the time comes for you to set out on your journey you shall have a good sword and a fine horse. Now, are you coming with me?"



"I would if only I did not have to leave my mother all alone," Ionike said.

"That needn't stop us!" said the tsar. "She can live in the palace too."

After that there was nothing more Ionike could say, and the tsar took him with him to his palace. But when the tsar's servants came for Ionike's mother, she refused to go with them and asked them to give Ionike her love and to tell him that she would await his return in their house.

lonike Fet-Frumos lived in the palace for a number of years, and with every day that passed he grew stronger and stronger. He had only to strike a rock with the side of his hand for it to split in two, and he had only to squeeze a stone for it to break up into tiny pieces.

At last came the day when Ionike decided that it was time to set out on his journey, and when he heard about it the tsar sent for him and told him to choose a sword and a cudgel for himself and a horse as well.

Ionike chose a sword that was the sharpest and a cudgel that was the heaviest of any that were offered him and then went to the stable. The horses there were all handsome and sleek, but he had only to touch one for it to fall to the ground.

This made Ionike very angry.

"I don't want any of these horses!" he said.

He looked round him and saw a colt he had not noticed before in the far corner of the stable. The colt was small and skinny and his mane was dirty and matted, and as he came up to him he stamped his hooves and whinnied.

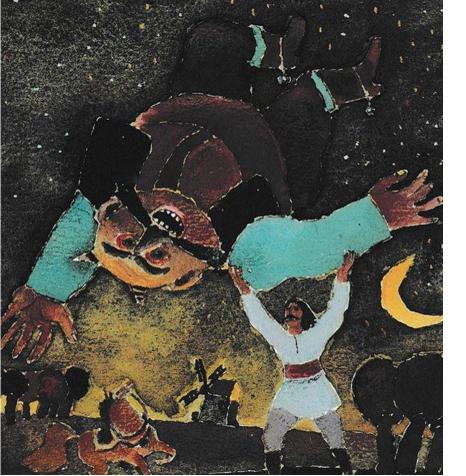
"A pitiful little thing, never would I take it for myself!" said Ionike, slapping the colt's back.

But unlike the other horses the colt did not fall and only stretched out his neck to him as if asking him to bridle him and promising to serve him faithfully.

Ionike bridled him, and Io!—the colt shook himself and turned into a handsome stallion, one whose like could not be found anywhere! Ionike saddled him and jumped on his back, and he at once set off at a trot, the sparks flying from under his hooves and lighting the way as he ran and the earth quaking and rumbling beneath him and starting an echo in the mountains.

Whether Ionike was on his way for a short or a long time nobody knows, but he and his horse were tired, so, seeing a bridge spanning a river before him, he stopped the horse, set him free to graze on the bank and himself lay down there for a sleep.

He closed his eyes and was dozing away when he heard the pounding of a horse's hooves on the river's opposite bank. The sound grew louder as the horse galloped up to the bridge, and Ionike opened his eyes just in time to see it start and back away with a snort. The man mounted on the horse struck it with his whip.



"You old nag you, may the wolves eat you up, what are you scared of? You boasted that you feared none save that great hero, Ionike Fet-Frumos!" he cried.

Ionike sprang to his feet.

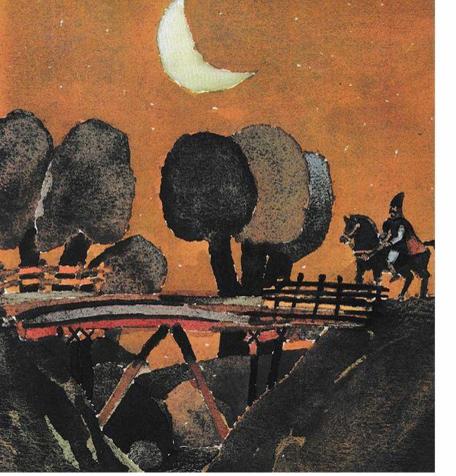
"I am Ionike Fet-Frumos! No wonder your horse is frightened," said he loudly.

At this the man let out a bellow of laughter, and so loud was it that the river was furrowed by waves.

"Brave, aren't you!" he cried. "Don't you know me? I am Dusk, the dragon who carried away the sun and locked it in a dungeon. Be off with you!"

"I'll not go away, let us fight, Dusk!" Ionike returned.

Dusk jumped from his horse's back and came at lonike. He lifted him high and then threw him down so that lonike was driven up to his ankles into the ground. But lonike fought back and had soon driven the dragon into the ground up to his knees. Both of them were flushed now and breathing hard, and Dusk grabbed lonike, and raising him high over his head, swung him round and round and then drove him into the ground up to his waist. But this only angered lonike the more. He gathered all of his strength and flung the dragon over his shoulder, driving him into the ground up to his neck.



Then, pulling his sword from its scabbard, he smote off the dragon's head. After that he mounted his horse and rode away.

On and on he rode till he came to another bridge spanning another river. He stopped his horse, and saying to himself "I think I'll take a rest, for who knows what is in store for me!" set him free to graze on the bank. Then, sitting down by the side of the road, he began singing his song.

"It was the dragons that stole the bright sun And carried it far away.

One who is brave, one who is strong
Will come and free it some day!" he sang.



And he had only just sung the last line when he heard the clatter of a horse's hooves—clip-clop!—coming from the river's opposite bank. The horse galloped up to the bridge, but instead of crossing it, started and backed away with a snort.

"A bait for the wolves and a treat for the ravens, that's what you are, you old nag you!" the rider cried. "Why do you back away? You told me that none could frighten you save Ionike Fet-Frumos!"

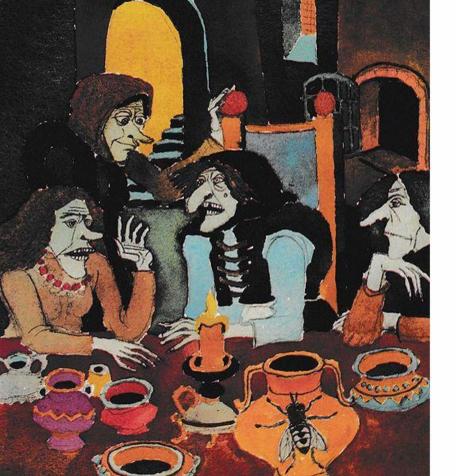
"I am Ionike Fet-Frumos!" Ionike Fet-Frumos cried. "And who may you be?"

"I am Evening, the brother of Dusk, and you are as nothing compared to me!" the dragon told him. "I have only to blow once, and every living thing on earth will drop dead. So let us fight if you won't make way for me!"

They began to fight, they fought long and hard, and in the end it was Ionike Fet-Frumos who vanquished Evening. He drove him up to his neck into the ground and then he smote off his head.

After that he had a drink of water, watered his horse and rode on.

Over hills and dales he rode and over fields and forests and he only stopped when he came to a third bridge spanning a third river. And no sooner had he jumped to the ground than he saw a horse and a rider galloping up to the bridge on the river's opposite bank. But the horse stopped short when it reached the bridge and would go no further.



Seeing it, Ionike's own horse turned his head and looked at him.

"The two battles you fought are as nothing compared to the one you now face," said he in low tones, "for Midnight the Dragon himself is there before you. But fear nothing, for you will vanquish him!"

Ionike and Midnight began to fight, and never had there been a fiercer battle. Midnight came at Ionike and with his first blow drove him up to his chest into the ground. But this did not stop Ionike who seized the dragon and drove him into the ground up to his neck. He pulled out his sword and was about to smite off the dragon's head, but the dragon scrambled out of the pit and came at him again! They fought for a long time, but neither could overcome the other, and so weak were they now that they dropped to the ground, both of them, and lay there, hardly being able to take breath.

All of a sudden what should they hear but the whirring of wings coming from overhead! They looked up, and there, wheeling just above them, was a kite!

"Please, kite, sprinkle some water over me and give me back my strength!" Midnight cried. "I will kill Ionike Fet-Frumos, and you will cat your fill of his flesh." "Please, kite, my brother, sprinkle some water over me and give me back my strength!" Ionike cried. "I will free the sun, and you will bask in its rays and warm yourself!"

The kite made no reply. He dropped down on to the river, and scooping up some water with his wing, sprinkled Ionike with it. Then he dropped down a second time, and drawing some water into his beak, gave it to Ionike to drink.

Ionike was filled with fresh strength. Up he jumped, and falling on the dragon, cut him in two with his sword.

"Thank you for helping me, kite!" he cried. "And now tell me where I am to find the sun. You fly everywhere and must know where it is!"

"Ride straight on and don't stop till you reach the forest," the kite said. "The dragons' castle is just beyond it, and I think you will find the sun in one of the castle dungeons. But you are much too trustful. Strength is no match for cunning."

"I have enough cunning for both of us!" said Ionike's horse.

"Well, then, be off with you, and may good luck attend you!" the kite cried.

Ionike rode on, and whether a short or a long time passed nobody knows, but he came to a forest, and so dense was it that he could neither ride through it nor pass through it on foot.

Ionike's horse stopped.

"Only a fly can hope to pass through this forest," he said. "Pluck a hair from my mane and tie it round your waist, and you will turn into one. After that fly to the castle and try to find out where the sun is kept, the dragons will be sure to talk about it. And if you want to get back your proper shape, just light on the ground. I will wait for you here."

Ionike did as the horse said, and turning into a fly, made his way to the castle. He flew all around it, trying to find an opening or a crack in the wall through which to fly inside. In the end he got into the castle through the chimney flue, and lo!— sitting at a table there and talking were the mother of Dusk, Evening and Midnight and their three wives.

Ionike remembered his horse's warning and kept very quiet.



"Where can my sons be, I'm worried about them," said the dragons' mother. "I could always hear the clatter of their horses' hooves before, but now there's not a sound. Could they have met with some misfortune?"

"Nonsense, Mother, whom have they to fear!" said her daughter-in-law.

"Ionike Fet-Frumos, that's whom! He was destined from birth to free the sun."

"A curse on this Ionike Fet-Frumos!" said Dusk's wife. "Even if he should succeed in freeing the sun, he will not feast his eyes on it long. When he sets out on his journey home, I will turn into a well, and he will drink some of my water and die."

"And I will turn into an apple-tree," said Evening's wife. "He will take a bite of an apple of mine and drop dead."

"Good!" said Midnight's wife. "As for me, I will turn into a grapevine. He will cat a grape of mine and drop dead. "

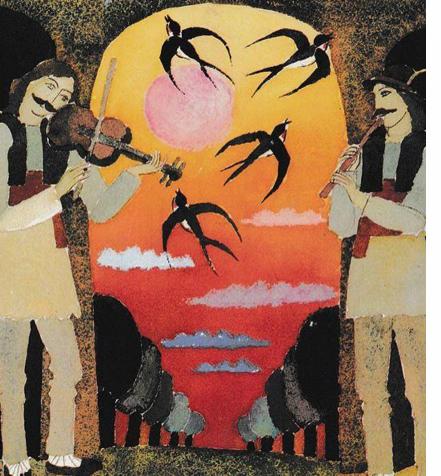
"You mustn't boast, my dears, for it will lead to nothing good," said the dragons' mother. "Better go and see if the sun is safely in the dungeon still."

The dragons' wives went down into the dungeon, and lonike flew after them.

Standing in the dungeon was a chest bound with iron, and when they saw a sun ray stealing through a chink in it, the dragons' wives did not even lift the lid.

"It's just as we thought, the sun is in the chest!" said they. "Our mother-in-law is always imagining things!" And with that they left the dungeon.

No sooner were they gone than Ionike got back his proper shape and lifted the chest lid, and the sun floated out of the chest, burnt its way through the dungeon's oaken doors and soared up to the sky. It lit up the earth with its rays, and lo!—the birds began to sing, and the people to smile and embrace one another. Never before had there been such rejoicing!



The Black Tsar alone did not rejoice. He had wanted the sun to be his alone, and that was why he had had lonike live in his palace. Dark with fury, he climbed up on to the palace roof, and wanting to seize the sun, reached for it with both hands.

But he misstepped and fell to the ground, and that was the end of him. And if you think that anyone grieved for him, you are mistaken.

As for Ionike Fet-Frumos, he followed the sun out of the dungeon, got on his horse and set out on his journey home.

The sun shone overhead, and not being used to this, he felt hot and uncomfortable despite his joy. And oh! how thirsty he was, so thirsty that he could hardly bear it! He looked about him and saw a well by the wayside. The water in it was as clear as crystal, and he was about to take a drink when he remembered what Dusk's wife had said. So he struck the side of the well with his sword, and when a stream of black blood ran out of it, he knew that Dusk's wife was dead.

lonike rode on, and he was as thirsty as ever. He looked about him, and he saw an apple-tree growing by the wayside, the apples on it rosy and fresh and fairly asking to be eaten, lonike struck the apple-tree with his sword, and there, on the road before him, lay Evening's wife, dead.

Ionike rode on again, looking about him for a sight of the grapevine with the poisoned grapes. He saw it soon enough and struck it with his sword, and now Midnight's wife was dead too.

Of the dragons' whole family their mother alone was still alive, and what she might have turned herself into lonike could not guess. He looked up at the sky, and he saw a black cloud cut by zigzags of lightning moving swiftly across it. The thunder crashed, and lonike knew that the cloud was the dragons' mother. She was almost upon him now, and as she opened wide her jaws, the upper part touching the sky and the lower, the earth, flame poured out of them.

Ionike spurred on his horse, and the horse turned off the road and carried him into a smithy which stood by the wayside. Ionike shut and bolted the door, and he was just in time, for the dragons' mother was very close. She tried to smash the roof and to break down the door, but not being able to do it, decided to use cunning.

"Please, Ionike Fet-Frumos, let me take a look at you, for never have I seen anyone so brave!" said she in the sweetest of voices.

"Why not! Just wait a moment!" Ionike told her.

He fanned the flames in the forge, held his cudgel with its steel pins over it till it was red-hot and then made a hole in the wall. The dragons' mother put her head through it, Ionike sprang aside and held out the red-hot cudgel, and she swallowed it and dropped dead.

There was nothing more to fear, so lonike opened wide the smithy door, and lo! —the black cloud was gone, and the sun shone overhead.

Ionike got on his horse and rode on till he reached his own realm where he was welcomed by all. He came to his village and stopped his horse in front of his hut, and his mother ran out, weeping, and threw her arms about him. And those were her last tears, for she knew only joy and happiness and never had cause to weep any more.